

Race fans meet legends

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1/18/2011 - **JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq** -- Deep rumbling of engines revving-up shook the ground as Indianapolis 500 winners Mario Andretti, Al Unser Jr. and Johnny Rutherford took up pole positions along the flightline during an Indy 500 Centennial tour Jan. 17.

The drivers were watching a pair of F-16 Viper jets take off while touring the base. The visit was part of a 10-day Armed Forces Entertainment morale tour of U.S. bases in Europe and the Middle East and to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Indianapolis 500. IZOD IndyCar Series team owner Sarah Fisher, Firestone Indy Lights race winner Martin Plowman and de Ferran Dragon Racing driver Davey Hamilton were part of the group as well.

Mario Andretti, one of the most successful Americans in the history of auto racing, said he appreciates the chance to visit with Airmen.

"It is a privilege to come here and hopefully bring a little cheer from home," Andretti said. "We enforce the fact that America thinks of and appreciates what you are doing."

Andretti is one of two drivers to win races in Formula One, IndyCar, World Sportscar Championship and NASCAR.

After watching the Vipers take flight, Andretti, who's flown in an F-15 Eagle, F-16 Viper and F-111 Aardvark, remarked on the aircraft as an amazing piece of machinery and the closest thing to a race car.

"The race car is strictly a purpose machine and not a derivative of anything," he said. "It (is built to) win races and go as fast as possible, like (the F-16) when it comes back and it's cleaned up with no more (missiles) on the wings, you know it's done some damage out there."

Staff Sgt. Donald Slayton, 332nd Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron F-16 dedicated crew chief deployed from Misawa Air Base, Japan, had the chance to meet the legendary drivers during the tour.

"I'm a huge fan and have been around racing my whole life," the Gainesville, Fla., native said. "I was dead-set on being here when I found out they were coming. I love racing."

Sergeant Slayton, who convinced a coworker to cover his position at work so he could be at the event, was excited to meet Sarah Fisher, the first woman to stand on the podium during an IndyCar event. She was the third-place finisher in 2000 at the Kentucky Speedway.

"I like to see female drivers giving the guys competition on the tracks, which is kind of awesome," he said.

Fisher retired from racing last year and is the youngest woman to compete in the Indianapolis 500 at age 19.



JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq- - Staff Sgt. Michael Gavaghan, 332nd Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron F-16 crew chief, explains the set-up of the F-16 Viper cockpit to Dill Driscoll, Armed Forces Entertainment coordinator, Jan. 17, 2011. The Indy Car group visited JBB during an Armed Forces Entertainment Indy 500 Centennial Tour. Sergeant Gavaghan is a native of Holland, Pa., and is deployed from Misawa Air Base, Japan. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Keyonna Fennell)



JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq- - Senior Airman Christopher Manfredo, 332nd Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron F-16 crew chief, shows Al Unser Jr., left, Indy 500 winner, and Terry Angstadt, president of Indy Car Series, the cockpit of an F-16 Viper jet Jan. 17, 2011. Mr. Angstadt and the Indy Car group visited JBB during an Armed Forces Entertainment Indy 500 Centennial Tour. Airman Manfredo is deployed from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., and is a native of Springfield, Ill. (U.S. Air Force photo/ Staff Sgt. Keyonna Fennell)

Before parting to meet and greet with Airmen and race fans at Sustainer Theater, Andretti said he was impressed with the quality of people involved in the military.

"I've said it a thousand times and I will always repeat it. I feel that (servicemembers in the) military are the most noble and professional on the planet, and all of you should be proud of that," he said. "We get thanked a lot for coming over, but it should be the other way around. I thank you for being here, so...godspeed to all of you."